

Grassroots

...a different point of view



Annual Report 2021 – 2022



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Foreword

The Revd Canon David Lawson (Chair of Trustees)

Over the last year the work of GRASSROOTS has been celebrated and acknowledged in many ways, not least with the award of an MBE to Johnny, our Director. This was a wonderful recognition of Johnny's dedication, commitment and tireless work in Luton and further afield. We are enormously proud and privileged to have Johnny as our Director. It is not surprising then that his experience and expertise are sought beyond Luton such as his participation in the General Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in Germany, his invitation to the European Regional Assembly of the Council for World Mission and several other meetings of different Church denominations which support the work of GRASSROOTS. GRASSROOTS benefits greatly and is in turn able to help others too from involvement in such ecumenical engagements as there is always a cross fertilisation of ideas and experiences.



Nearer home, GRASSROOTS' work was also recognised and celebrated with an invitation to the BBC Radio Three Counties 2022 *Make a Difference Awards*. This recognises how people and organisations like GRASSROOTS have improved the life of others.

In March 2022, staff and Trustees celebrated Sister Maire's life and work in Luton since 2004. Sr Maire took us on a journey through all the varied work she had done in Luton. This was duly acknowledged with the presentation of gifts and warm words of gratitude. Sr Maire has not left GRASSROOTS but it just felt right to pause and mark her significant contribution to GRASSROOTS and to Luton. Congratulations also to Ruth Tetlow, one of our Trustees, who was awarded the Hubert Walter Award from the Archbishop of Canterbury for her outstanding contribution to interfaith relations in Birmingham for over 40 years. We are also delighted that Ruth is slowly but surely recovering from her recent illness.

We had two GRASSROOTS supporter visits this year. They were Bishop David Oakley (of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Northampton) and George Watt (the Moderator of the United Reformed Church Thames North Synod). Johnny, some GRASSROOTS Trustees and I accompanied them on a tour of Luton, visiting various faith communities. Both Bishop David and Moderator George were deeply impressed by all they saw and learnt. Johnny and I were equally impressed by their knowledge and understanding of the contemporary multi faith context in which Christians live, work and strive to co-exist with other faith traditions.

GRASSROOTS continues to work with the wider community of Luton, navigating its way out of the pandemic. The pages of the Report speak of the many challenges and opportunities that lie ahead, not least the economic situation facing our country and which will impact significantly on communities like Luton.

As I am drafting this, the country is mourning the death of Queen Elizabeth II. Her whole life had been one of dedicated service, underpinned by her strong Christian faith, while at the same time, she acknowledged the huge contribution other faiths made to our common life. May her example encourage us as we work for stronger, more cohesive communities.

Thank you to my fellow trustees for their continuing and significant contribution to the work of GRASSROOTS over the last year. Mindful of all that is facing our country and the world at large, it is critical that GRASSROOTS continues to be a sign of hope through the work it does to promote justice, peace and reconciliation. The often quoted saying is as relevant as ever: 'Better to light a candle than to curse the darkness.'

Annual Report Sep 2021 – Aug 2022

Despite the many challenges in 2021-22 such as the unexpected Fuel Crisis in Sep-Oct 2021 causing significant disruption and the “getting back to normal” after COVID, GRASSROOTS successfully organised several in-person COVID-safe events during Sep – Dec 2021. When the government announced restrictions again in the Dec 2021, due to the new COVID variant Omicron, many of our events were already held in person which was great. We did however proceed with caution throughout. Below are some of the events we have been involved in or instigated. Thanks to all who supported and helped organise these very worthwhile and helpful events.

Black Lives Matter

During the autumn/winter 2021 we fostered inter-racial conversations on racial justice issues not just amongst communities, but also between the clergy and lay leaders. We facilitated helpful discussions between the Church of England Bishop, Richard Atkinson and senior faith and denominational leaders. We also facilitated a special session with black faith & community leaders addressing issues of how the Council could make its services more accessible and ensure its staff and workforce reflect the diversity of Luton communities. As a result, the Luton Council has had a much better response from the faith communities, in particular from the Black Church leadership, to feed into its new Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) strategy.



Bishop Richard Atkinson's Inter Faith Visits in Luton on 16th Nov'21

Following this, two other events were supported and facilitated during the year by GRASSROOTS in which the Black Church & community leaders were encouraged to work with the Police and the local authority.

Climate Change

GRASSROOTS has been working alongside Luton's faith communities to highlight the urgency of the climate change issues. Ahead of COP26, GRASSROOTS held 4 major events;

i. Hosted Climate Activist's Epic Walk

GRASSROOTS hosted and supported 70-year old British south Indian climate activist Pushpanath Krishnamurthy's (called Push's) epic walk for climate justice (400 miles or one million steps) from London to Glasgow from 2 October to 2 November 2021.



Many faith leaders and community members shared what climate justice meant in their respective faith communities. The Mayor of Luton Cllr Mahmood Hussain said, *“With its declaration of a climate emergency, the Luton Council is confronting climate change as a priority and has pledged Luton as a carbon neutral town by 2040.”* The Chair of Luton Council of Faiths Prof Zafar Khan added, *“Our gathering today signifies unity of purpose and unity of action for climate justice. We are united in our collective quest for climate justice.”* Push was overwhelmed by Luton’s hospitality saying, *“I am encouraged by the immense sense of fraternity shown by Luton. Climate change is already happening. It is the poorest people who have done the least to create the problem are suffering its worst impacts. Hence our collective quest for climate justice is much needed”.*



Send-off for Climate Activist Push from Luton on 7th Oct'21

ii. Co-organised the “Climate Crisis: Faith in the Environment” Virtual Event

On 23 Oct '21, commemorating the UN Day GRASSROOTS co-organised a virtual event “Climate Crisis: Faith in the Environment” involving 9 different faiths & belief representatives, who shared the importance of actively preserving creation and living in harmony with the environment. Quoting a UNDP research figure of US\$423 billion spent globally every year to subsidise fossil fuels, UNA Luton Chair Dr Nazia Khanum, OBE, DL noted, *“This could pay for three times the annual amount needed to eradicate global extreme poverty.”* Professor Zafar Khan Chair Luton Council of Faiths said, *“Climate Change is much bigger than any of us, but the importance of our actions cannot be underestimated. Faith communities have much to contribute.”*



UNA Luton Faith In Environment Event – Tree with different religious symbols

iii. Helped facilitate presentations for COP26 in Luton

With the UK hosting COP26, many people in the UK had walked & travelled to Glasgow to put pressure on the governments, demanding action for climate justice, but many also took action in their own local areas by joining the COP26 Coalition Day of Action on Sat 6 November. In Luton over a hundred people had gathered at 1pm at the Town Hall. GRASSROOTS helped facilitate the presentations and ensured the event was held safely. Bedfordshire Climate Change Forum, Luton Quakers and Friends of the Earth were some of the organisations who spoke at this event.



Global Day of Action for Climate Justice at the Town Hall in Luton

Jeremy Williams – local author and activist writing The Earthbound Report, recognised as the best green blog by the UK Blog Awards said, “we deserve better; better than the decision to prioritise corporate profits and economic growth over a liveable future. For the world’s most vulnerable, for the natural world and for our children – We can do better!”

iv. Involved different faith leaders in the Annual Peace Light service

This year’s Peace Light Service on 14 Dec’21 led by All Saints Church Luton was dedicated to the cause of Climate Justice with the theme being “Peace with the Planet”.

GRASSROOTS involved different faith leaders in sharing their faith perspectives, on "how their faith inspires them to establish peace with the planet" which was really inspiring.

Welcoming the Peace Light, Luton's Mayor Cllr Mahmood Hussain said, "*May this light be a sign of our commitment to making peace with the planet – our earthly home.*" The words from the closing prayer summed it up, "*May we see the world, our common home, not as a resource to dominate and exploit, but as a gift to be cherished by all generations.*"



Peace Light Service - Luton

'Zoom Peace' Event

On International Day of Peace (21Sep' 21) we held a virtual presentation commemorating 25 years of Luton Council of Faiths (LCoF) and its partnership work with GRASSROOTS. This event covered a range of issues including Racial Justice, Mental Health, Climate Change, Bee Keeping, Luton Peace Garden initiative, helping refugees etc. A faith leader said "A tiny mustard seed born out of GRASSROOTS has grown into a big safe and secure tree".

Peace Garden

Led by Sujel Miah, a member of Luton Council of Mosques, Luton's Peace Garden Initiative is about planting trees in remembrance of those who died of COVID in Luton. GRASSROOTS has supported this initiative in developing and executing its plans in close partnership with Luton's faith communities, community groups and Luton Council's Park Services.

We helped prepare a short awareness video (<https://t.co/X0u1SboQ00?amp=1>). We also co-launch a fundraising appeal to all places of worship & faith communities in Luton. 75% of the funding target of £30k (<https://bit.ly/3niSwdi>) has already been raised to plant over 700 trees, half of which have already been planted. This is a wonderful demonstration of how Luton's diverse communities are sharing the grief together and are working for a better and greener world for all. See link for more information : <https://www.justgiving.com/campaign/Peacegarden>

Events held during Inter Faith Week 14-21 Nov'21

To contribute to strengthening inter faith relations which had been strained in the last two years due to various factors including global political developments in the middle east, south Asia and the Black Lives Matter movement, GRASSROOTS initiated four activities strategically during the Inter Faith Week (IFW) ensuring it's ethos and spirit continue to influence life in a positive way.

IFW begins on Remembrance Sunday to remember the services of millions of non-British, non-European soldiers too who were killed in action alongside British and other European soldiers.

i. Remembrance Services

During the Remembrance Services held across Luton, we emphasized how our soldiers and civilians did not sacrifice their lives for the kind of 'nationalism', 'hate' & 'racism' we see all over the world today and how we must not allow society to recreate mistakes from the past but to learn to appreciate the importance of co-existence. We need one another for the well-being of all and that of our common home, the planet earth.



Remembrance Service at University of Bedfordshire

ii. Strengthening Cohesion in Luton

On Mon 15 Nov'21, people from different faiths were invited to celebrate Luton Council of Faiths (LCoF) 25th Anniversary. In this year, LCoF had also received The Queens Award for Voluntary Services (QAVS). This event acknowledged the contributions of several of its volunteers, faith and community leaders, supporters and partner organisations.

Door to door badge presentation for those who are housebound



Luton Council of Faiths QAVS Badge Presentation during Inter Faith Week

iii. Joint event with the Church of England - St Albans Diocese

On 17 Nov'21 we organised an event with the Church of England - St Albans Diocese. It was very poignant as being a diverse society, we were challenged to demonstrate our commitment to engaging and partnering with one another for the common good. Faith & community leaders from Luton, Bedford, Watford and St Albans shared positive stories of living well together as good neighbours and gave practical examples of navigating their way through difficult issues



Diocesan IFW Event at St Stephen's Church Hall

iv. Visit of C of E Bishop Richard Atkinson

We facilitated the C of E Bishop Richard Atkinson's visits to different places of worship across Luton. During these visits we addressed issues of Israel-Palestine conflict and India's emerging political landscape impacting community relations in Luton, while also reviewing with Black faith leaders the issues and concerns raised by the *Black Lives Matter* movement and its impact in Luton. Sharing concerns like this helps communities feel acknowledged; keep a positive mind-set and an informed understanding of issues.



Bishop Richard Atkinson's Inter Faith Visit in Luton

Bedfordshire Lieutenancy's Service of Thanksgiving, Remembrance and Hope

GRASSROOTS supported Bedfordshire Lieutenancy's Service of Thanksgiving, Remembrance and Hope, which was held on 10 Oct'21.



Lieutenancy's Annual Service of Thanksgiving and Remembrance

In her message, HM Lord-Lieutenant of Bedfordshire Helen Nellis, thanked the Bedfordshire communities saying *"During the past 18 months. I am so proud that people of Bedfordshire have shown their generosity of spirit in such large measure and am optimistic that we will go forward in our determination to build communities where all feel welcome, at home and are able to flourish."*

Near Neighbours Programme

The work of *Near Neighbours* (NN) has been continued by GRASSROOTS since Kim Greig, who was Coordinator, left in August 2021. The following are the key highlights;

A. Grants

GRASSROOTS managed to work with 19 applicants, but since the funding available was much less we managed to get 4 projects funded as listed below.

- 1) Golden Arrow 'Archery Tag' sessions helped to keep many young people off streets in an area with high levels of gang crime.

- 2) Simply Deez Events CIC published and launched an anthology book (as a sequel to the first book) with 25 women & men writing a chapter each documenting their time during lockdown and five monthly online sessions helped to upskill people on: writing, mental health & well-being, mindfulness & breathing techniques and entrepreneurship.



Dee Bailey Book Launch

- 3) The FEAST Programme organised 3 inter-faith dialogue sessions during Christmas, Easter and Fairtrade Fortnight helping young people to discuss different topical topics such as “can the vaccine can be trusted or not?”, “Finding a meaningful and fulfilling occupation”, “Different faith perspectives on the climate crisis and/or the sovereignty of God in relation to the world-shattering events such as the pandemic or war.”



FEAST Climate Change Conversations

- 4) Luton Council of Faiths (LCoF) held a multi-faith multicultural gathering celebrating 25 years of its partnership work with GRASSROOTS.

B. 21ST CENTURY PARENTING – A CASE STUDY



21st Century Parenting Project & Workshops Funded by NN

This interactive 10-week programme was adapted to meet the needs of the Luton community. The aims were to improve family relationships and teenagers’ behaviour at home, school and in the wider community and to encourage social interaction between people from different neighbourhoods and backgrounds. Parents held discussions, watched DVD clips, took part in the role plays and activities and completed weekly tasks at home to practice their skills.

All participants from diverse faiths and cultural backgrounds felt a significant improvement in their self-esteem and ability to deal with stress thus creating a sense of cohesion and togetherness. As a result some are seeking further learning, volunteering or work opportunities.

C. Other Training Programmes

We delivered three FREE training programmes in Luton of the following:

- 1) COVID Cash Recovery (CCR) - 2-hour webinar up-skilling churches, charities, community leaders and organisations to provide information and resources, to help communities recover from money issues that have arisen due to COVID-19.
- 2) Let's Talk Money - 2-hour workshop introducing young people to basic money skills such as knowing and understanding where to start when creating and managing a budget, the importance of saving for a poverty-free future.
- 3) Diverting to Digital (D2D) - 3-hour beginner and advanced workshop which covered using social media, websites and video calls/zoom meetings. It also included how to set up a website, create web content and create/schedule social media posts using free web tools such as Canva for designing leaflets/flyers etc.

D. Near Neighbours (NN) Network

We launched the national *NN Network* in Luton and promoted it amongst diverse communities enabling individuals & groups to connect and collaborate beyond Luton. Many have subscribed and receive directly from NN a regular newsletter, attend online events, share knowledge and resources with a wider and national network and feel better supported.

E. National Webinars

GRASSROOTS helped deliver the following two national webinars through the NN Network;

1. Climate change and racism are two of the big challenges of our time, and they are connected. Drawing on his book, *Climate Change is Racist: Race, Privilege and the Struggle for Climate Justice*, Luton based author Jeremy Williams looked at the roots of this injustice, and what it means for us today as we work for a fairer, more sustainable world.
2. Community gardening projects are a fantastic way to bring together people in a relaxed, participatory environment. In this webinar people learnt about setting up a community garden working with local authorities, managing public spaces, coordinating volunteer work patterns, building a sense of common good etc. Konni from Luton's Edible High Town Project, working on neglected public urban land, shared an enriching input. Edible High Town Project was initiated by GRASSROOTS & NN Programme.



*NN National Network
Webinar on Community*

F. Short Videos

We recorded two short videos for the use of NN & CUF (Church Urban Fund) nationally – one reflecting on the importance of our work with the public sector agencies in Luton and the other a reflection on the theme of ‘Adaptability’ during Lent.

COVID19 & Vaccination Headlines at the start of 2022

On 27 January 2022, the last of the government’s Plan B COVID19 restrictions were lifted. The success of the vaccination programme was cited as one of the major factors behind this. The role of local government and voluntary & faith sector organisations had been crucial in encouraging vaccine take-up, alleviating the fears and anxieties of those who were hesitant to take the vaccine, and encouraging everyone to keep themselves and each other safe. GRASSROOTS had played a good part in encouraging people from different faith communities to help translate key public health messages. This was really helpful in encouraging the vaccine uptake.

Fairtrade Fortnight 2022

During Fairtrade Fortnight (21 Feb – 6 Mar 2022), St Christopher's Church (Round Green), in partnership with Luton Fairtrade Steering Group, GRASSROOTS, Luton Council of Faiths & NN Programme, held its Annual Fairtrade Cake Baking Competition. The cakes were presented with recipe and the packaging as evidence of Fairtrade ingredients used. Prizes were given to the top three winners, voted in by the guests. This was a good reminder that our ‘inter-dependence’ on one another is at the very heart of the Fairtrade message. Fairtrade is not about charity but justice – it is about paying workers a fair price for their labour and sustenance.



Fairtrade Cake Bake Competition at St Christopher's Church

International Women's Day 2022

In commemorating this year's International Women's Day, GRASSROOTS & NN Luton supported 3 events as listed below

- i. Ghar se Ghar (Hindi/Urdu Words meaning 'Home to Home') – a Luton based women's group organised an event about women's safety & wellbeing and invited women to make relevant contributions from different religious, personal and professional perspectives. Some survival stories shared were tremendously powerful and inspirational. To educate women about identifying threats and signposting women to the right places for safety, several organisations such as Women's Aid in Luton, Luton All Women's Centre, Luton Against Sex Trafficking (LAST), Luton Samaritans etc. shared valuable information.
- ii. Simply Deez Events (NN Grant Recipient) created a market place for all the relevant organisations to showcase and project their services for the well-being of women
- iii. Shanthona (a Bangladeshi Women's Group, also a former NN Grant Recipient) focused on Bangladeshi women, their recreation, mental health and overall well-being.



Women from different faiths and cultures working together in Luton

Working with Women across Faiths & Cultures

We have continued to work with women from different faiths and cultural backgrounds through supporting the women's network of 'Ghar se Ghar' (Hindi/Urdu words meaning 'From Home to Home'), which is a 'not for profit' workers co-operative partnership, limited by guarantee and with charitable aims and objectives. The organisation is run by women from Muslim, Hindu and Christian backgrounds. Throughout the year, they have been offering one to one support and signposting/referral to other support services to assist with the issues of forced marriage, physical and mental health problems, homelessness, domestic violence, drug problems, benefit advice, and Covid. Due to Covid lockdowns all its groups (Bury Park, Ashcroft and Beech Hill) were closed, but Ashcroft had re-opened in autumn 2021. Since then regular weekly recreational and well-being activities have been taking place for this group. In summer 2022, we also supported 'Holding Space Collective LTD', a new Luton-based multi-arts company, for community conversations through live and digital art forms, mainly responding to the key Q – 'Who Are You...Really?', exploring identity and featuring video interviews of Luton residents aged under 25 and over 60.

High Sheriff of Bedfordshire visits Luton

It is admirable that the present High Sheriff of Bedfordshire, Lady Jane Clifford, soon after her appointment, made an effort to visit Luton's Madinah Mosque, Church of God in Christ (COGIC), Discover Islam Centre, and Guru Ravidass Sangat. Commending the role of GRASSROOTS, Lady Clifford stated, "By bringing people together from different communities, you are indeed promoting social action and transformation."



High Sheriff Visited Luton's different faith communities

ECUMENICAL EVENTS & VISITS

Visit of RC Bishop of Northampton Diocese & Moderator of United Reformed Church Thames North Synod

The Right Reverend David James Oakley, Bishop of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Northampton, and Reverend George Watt, Moderator of the United Reformed Church (URC) Thames North Synod made their first visit to the GRASSROOTS Programme during the year.

Referring to the Second Vatican Council, which was the twenty-first ecumenical council of the Catholic Church, Bishop David reinforced the Council's call for the Church's renewal in



URC Moderator George Watt savours some local delights in Luton

almost every aspect: from the Church's language and theology to the Church's role in the world, especially its relationship with other religions. Bishop David concurred that interfaith cooperation is not about trying to blend all religions into one, as if we are all the same and our differences don't really matter nor is it about negotiating away our differences. Instead, it is about realising that we have more in common than what divides us, and that must motivate us to cooperate for the common good and the flourishing of all people.

Both Catholic Bishop David Oakley and URC Moderator George Watt gave credit to GRASSROOTS for its efforts to bring communities together. *"It's wonderful to see that Luton's inter faith work involves action as well as dialogue"*, they said. *"The actions of Luton's faith communities speak louder than words and it is great to see their actions are inspired by their respective beliefs. Long may such partnership and networking continue, which is so clearly not about competing against one another, but complimenting one another."*



Catholic Bishop David Oakley's visit to Luton

After visiting different places of worship in Luton, including the Central Mosque, Discover Islam Center, and the Sikh Temple – Guru Nanak Gurudwara, Bishop David remarked, *"This has been one of the best and the happiest days since I became Bishop."* Moderator George Watt said *"I'd seek to continue blessing and assisting GRASSROOTS as it works to advance the causes of justice, peace, and reconciliation in a hurting world."*

Building Life Flourishing Communities from different Faith Perspectives - Virtual Gathering

We helped bring together eight speakers from Luton's different faith communities to contribute to a virtual event titled "Building Life Flourishing Communities from different Faith Perspectives" held by the Council for World Mission (CWM) Europe Region, in partnership with GRASSROOTS.

Revd Dr Michael Jagessar Secretary for Europe & Caribbean Regions at the Council for World Mission (CWM) said, "In the midst of forces and powers bent on despoiling, destroying and denying, the theme underscores CWM's commitment to God's vision of just world and flourishing life for all, and not for a few only. This event is our partnership to engage with all faith traditions on the theme we are all committed to." The words of theologian Sallie McFague represent aptly what the essence of this virtual event was all about.

"We, all of us, are being called to do something unprecedented. We are being called to think about 'everything that is', for we now know that everything is interrelated and that the well-being of each is connected to the well-being of the whole. This suggests a 'planetary agenda' for all the religions, all the various fields of expertise."

Recordings of the webinars can be found here:

<https://cwmeurope.org/what-we-do/a-series-of-webinars-building-life-flourishing-communities/>



CWM Inter Faith event – Building Life Flourishing Communities

Council for World Mission (CWM) Europe Regional Assembly

CWM Europe is one of six regions of the Council for World Mission (CWM), a worldwide partnership of churches in mission made up of over 21 million Christians in forty countries of the world. CWM works globally, regionally, cross-regionally and ecumenically.

At its 2022 Regional Assembly, the CWM Europe held a participative residential gathering which included worship, group work, interactive exercises and discussions and a day-long immersion visit to Luton during which the Assembly delegates visited Luton's different places of worship and engaged with members from Luton's faith



CWM Europe Regional Assembly visits Luton

communities, in observing and appreciating all that inspired and motivated them to work together and serve selflessly. Revd Dr Michael Jagessar, Secretary for CWM Europe, stated, *“Watching different faith communities working together in Luton have provided us hope – hope in action.”*

Week of Prayer for Christian Unity

This year’s ‘Week of Prayer for Christian Unity’ resources were prepared by the churches of the Middle East to encourage Christians to pray for church unity and also for interfaith understanding in the Middle East & Holy Land, and in the UK.

In Luton, the local Ecumenical Area Deans co-organised an event for Christians reflecting on the Church post-Covid. The guest speaker Rt Rev David Oakley, Bishop of the Roman Catholic



Week of Prayer for Christian Unity in Luton

Diocese of Northampton, said *“Our communion may not be perfect but it is real. Our common witness and collaboration in the post COVID context must include us talking together about the spiritual, social and ecological problems of our world.”* He added, *“We are pilgrim people of God. We are not there yet, we are on the journey. In the meantime, let’s not give up on one another”*

Christian Unity affirmed at Church Leaders’ Breakfast

In March 2022, Churches Together in Luton (CTL) gathered over breakfast to nurture and foster the ideals of peace and unity in our town, because peace is as important outside the Churches as it is within. A group of over 40 Church leaders from different Churches, different racial, cultural & ethnic backgrounds attended.

The keynote speaker, Pastor Alan West of Luton Christian Fellowship, said that where there is oneness and unity, God’s blessing is there. He acknowledged that as a diverse group, theologically



Christian Leaders' Breakfast

and doctrinally, not everything would be agreed upon but that should not stop us from discovering what we can agree upon.

Several Christian leaders also shared positive stories from their own experiences in which Christians in Luton have prayed together or co-hosted town-wide events and fundraised for the well-being of our town . A wide range of Christian charity groups and other organisations working for the good of our town, were acknowledged and acclaimed.

World Day of Prayer (WDP)

WDP service was held at St Mary's Church Luton, just after a Global Day of Prayer and Fasting was called by Pope Francis for the situation in Ukraine. This year's WDP resources were prepared by women in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The overarching theme was HOPE – very apt when the world had been coming to terms with the ongoing effects of the pandemic, the looming climate crisis and the most recent war between Russia & Ukraine. HOPE was depicted in the service through the lighting of candles, the distribution of seeds and the exchange of message worldwide via social media.



World Day of Prayer

Hospital Chaplains Training Day (featured in BBC Songs of Praise)

One of the barriers in the work of bringing people together is often understood to be the formal nature of the British society. People prefer to be introduced first, before they can talk or communicate with one another. Also there seems to be a lot of mistrust and it is easy to view all those who are different from us, as a threat or enemy. It is therefore essential that programmes like GRASSROOTS & NN, continue to create opportunities to bring people together so that we can understand why people are the way they are; and people can discover those different from us are not our 'enemies'; they are our 'allies', because they share the same aspirations as we do and that is to be loved, to be acknowledged, to be valued and to be affirmed and to pray and work together for the peace and prosperity of all.

Hence, a group of Chaplains from different ethnic and national backgrounds, serving at the Bedfordshire Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust had a training day out visiting different places of worship in Luton. Trust Chaplain Vanessa Bradley, noted *"when we visit different places of worship and learn a word or two from another language or when we learn even something as simple as how to greet someone from another culture, it gives chaplains more confidence to connect with people from various cultural, religious, ethnic, or national backgrounds, not only with their heads but also with their hearts."*

The Bedfordshire Hospitals Chaplains Day Out became even more special as the BBC Songs of Praise Team followed and covered it all. It was broadcast on the first Sunday in September.

OTHER EVENTS & ACTIVITIES

Holocaust Memorial Day (HMD)

For a second year, due to COVID19, national Holocaust Memorial Day (HMD) Service 2022 was commemorated online in which Holocaust survivors shared powerful stories of loss, grief, and resilience. The theme for this year was “One Day”. At the end, as part of the 'Light the darkness' initiative, many households in Luton lit candles and safely put them in their windows to remember the six million Jews murdered during the Holocaust alongside the millions others killed under Nazi persecution and in genocides that followed in Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia and Darfur. In Luton, this act was also about our local communities demonstrating its collective commitment to stand against any form of prejudice and hatred and to stand in solidarity with people today who face persecution because of who they are and their religious beliefs.



Holocaust Memorial Service 2022

Shri Guru Ravidass Ji's 645th Birthday Celebrations

At Luton's Guru Ravidass Sangat (Cardigan St. Luton) many dignitaries, including High Sheriff, Mayor, MPs & Councillors joined in the auspicious 645th birthday celebrations of Guru Ravidass, who was a great saint, philosopher, poet, social reformer and a prominent religious visionary of social equality in north India during 14th and 15th century. Dignitaries appreciated Luton's Ravidass community's efforts to outreach and serve the wider community. General Secretary Mr Sanjiv Kumar said, *“During Covid, Gurudwara's services to community were massively supported by many partners and organisations. Near Neighbours Luton was one such partner which had played a key role in all this.”* Honouring Johnny and Ryad from partner organisation Luton Council of Faiths & some others with Siropa – a length of cloth bestowed on someone as a mark of honour, he said, *“This is a way of thanking all of those extraordinary people, who supported acknowledged and guided us through our journey of supporting others.”*

Sri Lankan Muslims Celebrate 74th Independence Day

Luton's Sri Lankan Muslim organisation Al Furqan joined hands with the UK's National Council of Sri Lanka Muslim Organisations (COSMOS UK) in hosting an annual flagship event commemorating the 74th Sri Lanka Independence Day in Luton. The past and present national achievements and the important issues confronting the nation were raised. In his keynote

address, Johny noted that the beautiful island had gone through a lot of political, economic and social troubles during the last 74 years. While heralding Sri Lanka's Independence Day as a great hope and scope for further development, Johny called upon everyone to eradicate separatism, challenge injustice, work for progression of all. Jawzy Lebbe, local Sri Lankan Muslim leader who has made significant voluntary contributions over the years in Luton said,

"We must come together as one human race, to create a shared & a prosperous future for all in our beautiful world."



Sri Lanka 74th Independence Day Commemoration Event

Invitation to the Chief Rabbi's Iftar Gathering



Chief Rabbi hosted Iftar 2022

It was an honour to be invited to represent the Near Neighbours (NN) Programme at a very special Iftar gathering hosted by the Office of The Chief Rabbi of the UK. Welcoming an esteemed gathering of people from different religious, cultural and professional backgrounds, Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis said, *"Jews-Christians-Muslims are from the same family and occasions such as tonight's Iftar gathering are important to reinforce our relationship with one another. Together, we can adapt and respond to the emerging landscape, which is full of challenges. Every one of us can help by giving of*

ourselves to the community in some way." On behalf of NN Programme, GRASSROOTS & Luton Council of Faiths, David Jonathan presented Fair Trade South Indian hand-crafted candles to the Chief Rabbi for hosting such a wonderful gathering with a magnificent spread of food for guests.

Ukraine Peace Walk

It was heartening that ahead of Refugee Week, the Luton branch of the Association of Ukrainians in Great Britain invited all to join in a Peace Walk in Wardown Park as a sign of solidarity for world and global peace and for the safety, well-being and prosperity of Ukraine. In a statement, Prof Zafar Khan, Chair of Luton Council of Faiths said, *“It is also worth bearing in mind that refugees are not a single group. They have different experiences, because of race, class, gender, sexuality, age and immigration status. Fighting discrimination and disinformation, and countering nationalism and xenophobia therefore are crucial to ensure we nurture the space, wherever we are, to continually respond to the refugee crisis in the most amicable way.”*



Ukrainian Solidarity Peace Walk Jun'22 in Wardown Park

Celebrating Clouds of Blessings at Colours of Eid Festival

GRASSROOTS helped people from different faiths to be involved in an inclusive Parade - Colours of Eid - held on Sat 16 Jul'22 at St George's Square. The cloud props were named as “The Clouds of Blessings”.

Sarah Salim, the event coordinator thanked GRASSROOTS saying “The work you do is so significant. Long may you continue to bring Luton’s diverse communities together. I strongly feel that Luton town, and multifaith multicultural events like ours won’t be the same without your presence and contributions.”



When people connect, the Clouds become bigger symbolising unity and strength which brings more blessings for all. The Clouds celebrate all those who have gone through such challenging times through COVID19 but they are still working for the community.

Peace Garden Outdoor Storytelling Event

“How long you think it will take to count up to 1 million?” At an outdoor storytelling event, this question was asked by Luton based author Jeremy Williams from his book "Max counts to a Million". The book deals with the impact of COVID lockdown on an 8 year old. This event was hosted by Edible High Town at High Town's Peace Garden, which was originally launched by the Luton Council Faiths, with support from GRASSROOTS & Near Neighbours Programme.



Claim to Fame

Invitation to the National Thanksgiving Service for Her Majesty's Platinum Jubilee

It was a privilege for David Jonathan, Director, Grassroots Programme, Luton Council of Faiths and the Near Neighbours Programme in Luton to be invited to attend the National Service of Thanksgiving to celebrate Her Majesty's Platinum Jubilee held at St. Paul's Cathedral, followed by a Reception at Guildhall, on Friday, 3 June. The invitation was to those who had been recognised by Queen's Awards for their contribution to communities.

Expressing his gratitude to Luton's diverse communities and to all the faith, community, political and civic leaders, for all their support and encouragement, David Jonathan said, *"I am humbled and honoured to have been nominated. I was delighted to accept the invitation. I enjoyed every bit of the Service and Reception."*

The Investiture of David Jonathan, MBE

After attending a county level reception hosted by the Lord Lieutenant of Bedfordshire in March 2022 at Luton Putteridge Bury Campus, David Jonathan was invited to Buckingham Palace,

straight after the Queen's Platinum Jubilee Celebrations, for his Investiture. An Investiture is a very special day when someone who has been awarded an honour receives an award in person from The Queen, or a Member of the Royal Family. The investee visits a Royal residence, usually Buckingham Palace, with members of their family, to receive their insignia.



On 7 June 2022, David Jonathan received from Prince William, Duke of Cambridge, an MBE Award for his services to community cohesion and interfaith relations in Luton.

Watch the Investiture Ceremony here : <https://youtu.be/vVjq1ljuQBo>

UNA Luton presented Outstanding Peace Champion Award to David Jonathan

At a special event of UNA-Luton held on 28 Aug'22, Johny Director of Grassroots Programme, Luton Council of Faiths and the NN Programme was presented with a prestigious Award of Recognition for his services to community cohesion and interfaith relations in Luton.

Before HM Lord Lieutenant of Bedfordshire Helen Nellis presented the Award, UNA Luton Chair Dr Nazia Khanum OBE, DL shared the following words;

"Having worked as Chief Officer for Grassroots and Luton Council of Faiths for years, Johny has become the face of these organisations and has demonstrated to many in the community how it is possible to build bridges over turbulent waters and link up with communities seemingly miles apart from each other in many ways! I am a big admirer of his Peace-building work, his patience, his imagination and his passion for making progress in developing a better understanding of diversity, by building empathy, friendship, trust and common ground for sustainable peace. His determination to improve the conditions of the poor and the exploited was well demonstrated by his passionate work to make Luton a Fair Trade Town.



His knowledge of diverse religions is phenomenal and his relentless work towards keeping our town free from conflicts and hostilities is widely known and highly respected. He has been a supporter of UNA-Luton from its inception. The least we can do to show our appreciation of his passionate work for fairness, peace, environment and youth engagement is to give him a UNA-Luton trophy to say Johny we love and admire you."

In response, Johny said, "I am honoured and extremely grateful to receive UNA Luton Award. My thanks to all those who have overlooked and forgiven all my shortcomings and have supported me, prayed for me and blessed me over the years - all my Trustees, Office Bearers, Staff, Volunteers & Partner organisations. May I also thank in particular, the Anglican, Catholic, Methodist and URC Churches for their support, without which it will be impossible for me and GRASSROOTS to exist."

Celebrating Sr Maire's life and services in Bedfordshire

In the aftermath of 9/11 attacks on twin towers, when the world was reeling in a state of shock, people were angry and bereaved, GRASSROOTS in Luton was discerning how to respond to the people who were feeling bemused and bewildered because of the rampant fear and mistrust against those of particular religious and cultural identities. Innocent people of certain appearances were despised, hated, abused, harassed and even attacked. Everyone everywhere was trying and crying to see the signs of justice and fairness in the world. In such turmoil, Sr Maire Hayes had arrived in Luton, sharing with Christians and with those of different or no faith backgrounds, her inspirational perspectives of justice spirituality and making significant contributions. Her idea was not just to share with others what she had, but also to invite others to bring and share what they had. Through her engaging retreats and workshops, she helped people to pause and reflect and contemplate on what is the purpose of our being in this world. How do we understand justice for us and what it means for others? With reference to the famous quote of a German Catholic theologian Hans Kung "No peace among the nations without peace among the religions; No peace among the religions without dialogue between the religions", Sr Maire strived to bring Luton's diverse communities together for collective action for the common good. As she continues to strive to make the world a better and a fairer place, GRASSROOTS took time to glance over the past 20 years and celebrated and thanked God for Sr Maire's life and services in Luton.



Financial Summary September 2021- August 2022

Income	£
Grants received	75,519
Donations	4,827
Interest and other income	172
Sale of Fairtrade goods	3,819
Total	84,337
Expenditure – Charitable activities	
Mission Education and Advancement	48,471
Work with Women across Faiths and Cultures	8,580
Near Neighbours	29,665
Other Costs	13,759
Sub Total	100,475
Governance costs	2,985
Total	103,460
Net Expenditure for the year	
Total	19,123
Reserves at 31 August 2022	
Unrestricted	61,225
Restricted	11,840

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